



Catholic Faith, Life & Creed

Doctrinal Catechesis Sessions for adults based on
the Church Year, the Liturgy, & the Sunday Scriptures

Breaking Open the Word

by Mary Birmingham

Fourth Sunday of Lent C



“Prodigal Son”, Pompeo Batoni, 1773



Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Opening Prayer

Option 1. Use Opening Prayer from the Sunday Liturgy.

Option 2.

Prayer in Preparation for Baptism and in Preparation for Renewing Baptismal Promises

Almighty God, who rules all things,
we hasten with eager steps to the venerable font of eternal salvation,
and ask you, Magnificent God,
that you command this font which has been sealed
may be reopened with the keys of your mercy,
and impart to those that thirst a most sweet cup of water.
May the voice of your divinity sound upon these waters,
may the Spirit of your sanctification dwell therein
and bring healing to all ill.
May the abundant streams of paradise flow from it,
that by your goodness heavenly graces
may be bestowed upon these new-born children.

We ask this through Christ our Lord.

**Catholic
Faith, Life
& Creed**
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Breaking Open the
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Doctrinal Sessions.

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Liturgical Context

- ▶ Today is the Fourth Sunday of Lent. God's incredible reconciling mercy is the theme of today's Gospel.
- ▶ Scrutinies are celebrated with those who are preparing for baptism (elect) at the Easter season. There are three scrutinies. The first scrutiny is celebrated on the Third Sunday of Lent, the second scrutiny is celebrated on the Fourth Sunday of Lent, and the third scrutiny is celebrated on the Fifth Sunday of Lent. Scrutinies are penitential celebrations that help uncover what is still in need of reconciliation and healing in the elect as they prepare for baptism. Cycle A readings are used for the celebration of scrutinies. Thus, if scrutinies are celebrated, use the cycle A readings for the Fourth Sunday of Lent instead of the readings for this session.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, then surface insights in the wider group. (@Five to seven minutes)

- ▶ What spoke to your heart in today's liturgy?
- ▶ What reading, symbol, music, homily, spoke to you and why did it speak to you?
- ▶ What touched you the most in today's Gospel?

If time is a consideration, omit reflection on one or both of the readings. (You may want to concentrate on the Gospel alone.)

First reading: Joshua 5:9, 10-12

- ▶ Israel celebrates the first ritual commemoration of the exodus.
- ▶ The gift of manna is over. There is no need for it in the Promised Land. The Israelites ritualize their sojourn with a commemoration meal of unleavened cakes.
- ▶ The wilderness journey is over and the people begin the process of settling their new land.
- ▶ God provided in the desert; God will continue to provide. Now is the time to settle in and build the kingdom.



Mystagogy reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, then surface brief insights in the wider group. Catechist responds with a "brief" story from his or her life. See appendix #1 for an example.

- ▶ Do you truly believe God will provide for your needs? What evidence do you have that God has already taken care of you?

Second Reading: 2 Corinthians 5: 17-21

- ▶ Paul describes himself before he met Christ and after he met Christ.
- ▶ Paul considers himself a new creation in Christ.
- ▶ He insists that Christ's reconciling mission is the most important work of Christians. We are all called to offer Christ's reconciliation to God's people in the world.
- ▶ Paul insists that we are all sinners and that we are powerless over sin. We are in dire need of Christ's power to heal and reconcile.
- ▶ The effects of sin are complete alienation from God.
- ▶ Jesus experienced that alienation and abandonment on the cross—he became the ultimate victim of sin's wrath.



Mystagogy reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, surface brief insights in wider group. Catechist responds with a “brief” story from his or her life. See appendix #2 for an example.

- ▶ Consider the sin in your life. Consider the alienation and abandonment Jesus' experienced as a result of human sin. What are the implications for our lives today?

Gospel: Luke 13:1-9

Read or summarize the Gospel, perhaps provide a copy of the text for further reflection.

Gospel Exegesis

Please note: catechist may intersperse the questions at the end of the exegesis throughout your presentation where appropriate.) Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions before presenting the exegesis.

- ▶ What specifically touched you in this Gospel?
- ▶ What does this Gospel mean to you?
- ▶ We must remember the intended audience when we interpret the parable of the prodigal son. Tax collectors, sinners, scribes and Pharisees.
- ▶ The prodigal son demands immediate distribution of his inheritance—a serious affront to his father. He was saying to the father that he in effect wished him dead. The prodigal son is completely lost.
- ▶ The older son had the responsibility of reconciling the younger son to the father. He failed to do so, thus alerting the listener that there is a problem with the older son as well. He does not ever have to reconcile with his brother AND he benefits from the younger son receiving his inheritance—a win/win situation for the older son.

- ▶ Listeners marvel at the father's inconceivable patience and love.
- ▶ In order for the son's request to be legally binding, the father had to act as though the idea were his own.
- ▶ The parable continues and the prodigal son squanders his inheritance among the Gentiles.
- ▶ There is now an offense to the community since his association with Gentiles and pigs (an extreme offense) rendered him unclean and a threat to the ritual purity of the community.
- ▶ He decides to repent and go home. One might seriously question the sincerity of his repentance, however.
- ▶ The son sets his plan in motion. He had a moral responsibility to his father. The community would never allow him to return without making amends to his father. What if all the sons acted similarly?
- ▶ The recalcitrant son rehearsed his speech. "Employ me as a hired hand." There was no conversion implied in his offer to be a hired hand. Hired servants received a wage, and lived away from the estate. Hired hands were independent contractors and socially an equal with brother and father. The son was not looking for reconciliation; he was looking to save face. He could repay his debt, and still live away from home. Reconciliation was on his terms. He will save himself. He did not need anyone's saving grace.
- ▶ Landowners lived in village, not on an isolated estate. The prodigal son not only insulted his father, but he sinned against the community in three ways. 1. He insulted his father, 2. He sold the land and lost it 3. He squandered it on Gentiles.
- ▶ The father knew his son would one-day return so he prepared for his homecoming. The father understood all too well that the community would not accept him. He had to prepare the way. The father initiated reconciliation with the community. He devised a strategy.
- ▶ The father ran to meet his errant son—a humiliating action that no self-respecting elder would ever do. His action would draw attention, thereby drawing a crowd. Reconciliation would be public. The people would be privy to the father's amazing demonstration of humiliating love.
- ▶ The son is caught so off guard that when he sees his father run to him and offer him the robe and ring (indications of his status as true heir and son) he was speechless. His pre-rehearsed speech fell by the way side. **Herein is the moment of conversion**—the Father's unconditional, humiliating love.
- ▶ The father kisses him as a sign of reconciliation and forgiveness (healing touch). The son's pre-rehearsed speech falls by the wayside and he melts in utter conversion at so great an extension of unexpected love and mercy.
- ▶ The father reconciles him to the community with a banquet (images of reconciling power of Eucharist). A fatted calf meant the entire village was invited. The conferral of the robe demonstrated that the son is not only reconciled and forgiven but he is restored to former status. The ring was a symbol of restored trust. The shoes were a sign of a freed person, not a

servant.

- ▶ The son accepted his father's mercy and forgiveness. He accepted the grace his father offered him. He returned not as a slave, but as son.
- ▶ The older son (representative of Israel—the scribes and Pharisees) should have been a good host. Instead he humiliated his father in front of the village. The older son publicly breaks with the father. Again the older son's response would have caught the attention of the guests—they would have expected him to receive a thorough thrashing from the father.
- ▶ The father, however, extends the same humiliating love to his older son—he offers him the same reconciliation.
- ▶ The older son rejects the father and considers himself no more than a hired hand. The older son was estranged and rebellious in his heart while he was in his father's house.
- ▶ The community understood the older son's sin to be worse than the younger son. He was resentful. He was not honest. He lived in his father's house not as son but as hired hand. He too wanted his father dead—he too benefited from the younger son's request.
- ▶ The older son did not repent.
- ▶ God not only welcomes and loves sinners but he seeks after them with a humiliating kind of love, an unfathomable love. The Pharisees were invited to see themselves in the person of the older son. The parable ends with invitation to repent.
- ▶ This is known as a "How Much More" parable: "If this is how much this father loved his sons, how much more will your heavenly father love and show mercy and forgiveness to you".
- ▶ Without the Father's humiliating display of love, the younger son might never have grasped the level of the father's love. The self-effacing, out pouring of a humiliating love for his sons has echoes in the future cross of Christ.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in small groups of four. Use the last three or four minutes to surface the insights in the wider group. Catechist begins by sharing story from his or her life. See appendix #3 for an example. (@ Ten-twelve minutes)

- ▶ What is the primary message of this Gospel?
- ▶ Have you ever been loved as the sons are loved in this gospel? Have you ever tried to extend a humiliating, self-emptying love to someone else? What did you learn from the experience? What does your experience teach you about God and the implications of this Gospel?
- ▶ With whom do you most relate---the younger son, the older son, or the

- father?
- ▶ What is the challenge of this Gospel? In what way does it invite you to grow in faith and to be a better disciple?

Catechist invites participants to silently reflect on the following question.

- ▶ After reflection on today's liturgy, what one thing is God asking of you at this time in your life?
- ▶ What obstacles stand in the way of following God's call?

Concluding Prayer

Option 1. Celebrate a minor rite—an exorcism or blessing for catechumens: RCIA 90-97

Option 2. Pray the Prayer of Pope Clement

Option 3. Other suitable, but brief prayer. (Perhaps pray the Prayer of St. Francis.)

APPENDIX

#1. Years ago my husband was offered a job in another city. We put our house on the market—a house we loved. We were a week from moving to the new city and his new boss decided he did not have the money to bring on a new associate and thus terminated my husband. People were ready to move into our house. We had to find a place to live quickly—a place that would take four kids and two dogs in a week's notice.

I thought God had abandoned us. “O ye of little faith!” We found one apartment complex that had an opening. We moved in and then went to the local parish to enroll our children in the Catholic school. When we arrived at the parish the newly assigned priest happened to be a friend of ours. We had worked together in the healing ministry in years past. He was getting ready to open a new parish nearby and much to our amazement offered me the job of music and liturgy director in the newly formed parish. The rest is history. I have been in fulltime parish ministry for the past thirty years.

God used a circuitous route to steer us to what would be my life's vocation. God was and is in complete charge of our lives. I, like the Israelites, so often forget that truth.

#2. We are not called to dwell in a maudlin way on our role in Jesus' execution. We call Good Friday *good* because we know the rest of the story. Jesus rose again in order to save us from sin. We are, however, called to consider the sin in our lives and acknowledge that our sin thwarts Christ's ongoing work of redemption. When we are steeped in sin we are hardly focusing our attention on participation in the Paschal Mystery of Christ.

Several years ago there was a situation in a parish where I served. People took sides. There was great division. Friendships were forged by what side of the controversy people found themselves. It was very difficult not to get caught up in the whirlwind of gossip and detraction of members of the fractious sides.

Looking back on that very dark period, I see how good people can get immersed in sinful behaviors and attitudes that keep them from concentrating on doing God's work rather than thwarting it. I have long since repented for not being a voice of reconciliation. My prayer is that I would have the courage to be that voice if I ever again found myself in a similar situation.

#3. I am not aware of anyone humiliating himself or herself in the act of loving me unconditionally (except Christ), but I am the recipient of unconditional love in my life. I know that my family who has stood by me through all the difficult times in my life treasures me. I have friends who love me and are there for me no

matter what. I am blessed.

I do have just a partial glimpse of how the father in this story must have felt in the face of a child's total rejection. In the days before my son was diagnosed with a tragic mental illness, he was seriously acting out. He was in his late teens and early twenties. Some well-meaning friends counseled us to put him out of the house. After a great deal of prayer we made the decision to stay the course and be there for him no matter what. It was embarrassing. I was a person with a public ministry in a very small town. Everyone knew everyone else's business. The correctness of our decision would soon become apparent to us.

We later learned that when he had his first complete break and wandered aimlessly all over the state of Alaska, it was the memory of how we stood by him during that earlier time that compelled him to keep in touch with his family. I consider the decision we made to be a contributing factor in saving his life. We were his lifeline. He recognized that we were the ones who loved him no matter what.

The parable of the prodigal son is indeed a "how much more" parable. If we loved our son the way we were compelled to love him during that very difficult time, how much more, then, does God love us when we sin, when we reject our inheritance, when we get caught up in feelings of entitlement (such as the older son). God is there to run after us and die on a cross to get our attention about the level of his love for us. God will go to any lengths to save us, to heal us and to reconcile us. I am humbled to my core.



Connecting Liturgy with Catholic Doctrine

Possible doctrinal themes that flow from this week's
Liturgy of the Word and Eucharist

Sacrament of Reconciliation
Salvation
Symbols of Bread and Wine

Sin and Grace
Cross of Christ

Other themes may be chosen as well--choose from the index of doctrinal topics and create your own connecting statement. The following statements make the appropriate connections between the doctrinal issue you have chosen and the liturgy of the day.

SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION

Lent is a time we focus on the areas of sin in our lives and our need for God's mercy. It is also a time when the church offers multiple opportunities to celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation. The sacrament of reconciliation extends God's mercy and the reconciling presence of Christ to us sinners. Today's liturgy reminds us that the Father will go to any lengths to save the sinner. We need go no farther than the sacrament of reconciliation. Today's doctrinal session will focus on the SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION.

SALVATION

Today's liturgy is an invitation to acknowledge our need for salvation—to recognize that salvation is a process, that even though we can reject the salvation that is ours, we have a heavenly Father who is willing to go to any lengths to save us. We are all sinners in need of saving. Today's session will focus on SALVATION.

SYMBOLS OF BREAD AND WINE

In today's Gospel the Father reconciled the son not only to himself, but to the community as well. He killed the fatted calf—an allusion to the reconciling power of the Eucharist, the Eucharist that feeds the entire community. It is a reminder that the Eucharist re-presents the sacrifice of Christ, thus is a primary sacrament of reconciliation. Today we will focus on the Eucharistic symbols of bread and wine and what we believe about those Eucharistic symbols in the life of the community.

SIN AND GRACE

Today's Gospel is reminder that all of us are sinners---those of us who think we are righteous and those of us who know we are not. God seeks out the lost. We are all lost without God. Today's liturgy is a reminder that we are all sinners, but God is greater than our sin and desires to give us the grace to endure. Today's extended session will focus on the Church's teaching regarding SIN AND GRACE.

CROSS OF CHRIST

The father in today's parable extends love that goes beyond the boundaries—a humiliating kind of love. He humiliates himself in order to demonstrate the love he has for his two sons. Jesus demonstrates even greater love as he hung naked on the cross—as he poured out his life for every sinner. We are saved by Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. Each of us is invited to join to calamities, sufferings and joys of our lives to the Paschal mystery of Christ. Today's session will address the Cross of Christ and the Paschal Mystery.